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SENSITIVE

STATE FOR SCA/CEN, SCA/PPD, ECA, IIP, DRL

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: WESTERN CULTURE RETURNS

REF: ASHGABAT 0002

¶1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

¶2. (SBU) SUMMARY: To enforce his vision of "positive neutrality" in Turkmenistan and the uniqueness of Turkmen culture, former President Niyazov severely limited public expression of international culture, including the Russian (Soviet) culture many Turkmen grew up with. President Berdimuhamedov, however, has reopened the country to the world heritage of literature and music. The Ministry of Culture and Broadcasting appears to give precedence to cooperation with the United States. END SUMMARY.

THAT WAS THEN

¶3. (SBU) During President Niyazov's era, Turkmenistan became known for grand monuments; golden Niyazov statues; the president's "book of the soul," the "Ruhnama"; and a sad and destructive isolationism. Partly as an attempt to promote nationalism and partly due to his paranoia, Niyazov insisted the Turkmen and their culture were so unique they had no need for cultural influences from abroad. New Years was no longer widely celebrated, the circus was closed, and opera was no longer permitted. But President Berdimuhamedov, who came to power in February 2007, is changing that and allowing international culture once again to flourish.

THIS IS NOW

¶4. (SBU) International cultural elements are being allowed into the Turkmen cultural space at a higher rate than possible under Niyazov. Along side Niyazov's "Ruhnama" (in English, Hungarian, Russian, Chinese, Thai, and many other languages) on the bookshelves of the state-run book stores sit, modestly, President Berdimuhamedov's two books on medical reform undertaken while he was Minister of Health. At least one bookstore has started to display Russian translations of Western self-help and business books. While news broadcasts are still Niyazovian in content, American and other international films (without broadcast rights) are frequently shown on state TV. Everything from the claymation film of "Chicken Run" to "Seabiscuit" to classic John Wayne Westerns have been broadcast with Turkmen dubbing. Similarly, celebration of International Women's Day was returned to its Soviet-era prominence with broad media coverage of the holiday and events; and Turkmen celebrated this most recent New Years Day, the most important popular holiday in Soviet times, with

great enthusiasm and even extravagance (reftel), after years of official discouragement under Niyazov.

WIDENING THE CULTURAL SPACE

¶5. (SBU) In Niyazov's last years, cultural events and art were becoming more and more limited to expressions of praise for the President or manifestations of "Ruhnama" themes and verses. In contrast, Berdimuhamedov has modestly widened artistic expression across the full range of cultural life, from art, music, books, theater, and performing arts to TV and radio, film, and national holidays. Schools now allow students to study and perform plays by English and French playwrights, including Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet." We have heard of one school where there was a student performance of rock music. Whereas Niyazov worked to limit Russian cultural influence, Berdimuhamedov accepted a \$20 million grant from Gazprom to build the Pushkin Russian-Turkmen High School, a show-case building now under construction at a prestigious and highly visible location.

¶6. (SBU) Further examples of cultural change include once again allowing the publication and broadcast of book and cinema versions of Govshudov Kerbabayev's "Decisive Step," a love story based on traditional Turkmen courtship rituals Niyazov had banned as "too primitive." Folk painter Kamil Veliadhmedov won the President's Distinguished Medal for the Arts from Berdimuhamedov for his canvasses depicting the beauty of Turkmen Ahal-Teke horses and village life. There was open talk on state television of renaming the Music Conservatory after the late Turkmen composer, Nury Halmamedov (vice Turkmenbashi or Berdimuhamedov), and recently the Ministry of Culture announced a design competition for new sculptures and monuments for public places in Ashgabat, with a strong emphasis on historical figures, not contemporary presidents. In January 2008, President Berdimuhamedov announced the return of

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forbidden cultural fruit: the National Opera, the Turkmen Circus, and cinema multiplexes in Ashgabat and around the country (all of which were forbidden or closed by Niyazov). He also ordered the building of new film theaters. Newspapers and television cover neutral or "fluff" news items from abroad, in stark contrast to the near silence on international stories before Niyazov's death.

WESTWARD LEANINGS?

¶7. (SBU) The Ministry of Culture is approaching Western diplomats to assist in implementing President Berdimuhamedov's reforms for media. Deferring offers of assistance from Uzbekistan, Iran, and Russia, Ministry officials have turned to Post with requests for assistance in raising standards in broadcast journalism, identifying a Hollywood studio to partner with TurkmenFilm to revive the film industry, and training their theater companies in set design, direction, and staging. Ministry of Culture contacts have specifically noted that American media and entertainment have unique and significant experience that Turkmenistan should learn from. Other western missions have offered assistance in the field of media that the Turkmen have accepted with varying degrees of enthusiasm. But to post's knowledge the United States is the only country receiving focused requests for assistance in this area. In a remarkable example, the Ministry of Culture and the U.S. Embassy co-sponsored a Navruz spring holiday concert at the prominent Matamguly Theater. Eldar Hudiyev, an award-winning graduate of the Boston Conservatory of Music, performed a Western classical violin program, including John William's "Theme from Schindler's List," to a standing-room-only audience.

WHAT'S THE MOTIVATION?

¶8. (U) President Berdimuhamedov may have multiple motivations for changing Turkmen cultural life and expanding cultural opportunities. In part, he might be motivated by Soviet nostalgia or simply a Soviet paradigm. Berdimuhamedov came of age in the Soviet Union, in which the state provided cinema, opera, and circuses - exactly the cultural forms he's re-introduced. Although some of the rhetoric reveals a continued state command of the economy and cultural space, the president has also demanded a new national "ethos" of "the state

for the people," and has called for greater creativity in culture and media. Combined with an emphasis on foreign languages and exchanges, these seem to reveal an additional motivation for modernizing Turkmenistan and learning from the rest of the world.

¶9. (U) COMMENT: To the casual observer, Turkmenistan's cultural space still appears limited. However, beyond the monuments and statues of Niyazov and the portraits of Berdimuhamedov, culture in Turkmenistan is evolving in significant ways. In cultural affairs, President Berdimuhamedov is moving towards something more open, and ultimately more international in character - at the very least, a restoration of the finer cultural aspects of the Soviet Union. Change comes slowly like in other areas, and a top-down, anti-innovation psychology held over from the Niyazov era still stifles creativity and independent decision-making. However, the United States has a real opportunity to support our goals by taking advantage of Turkmen calls for assistance in developing news media and cultural programs. Even though they are well aware of many other offers from both friendly and not so friendly countries interested in the region, the Ministry of Culture has asked specifically for U.S. experts and cooperation. We want to be as responsive as possible. END COMMENT.

HOAGLAND